

Rattlesnake Conservation Project Review
Public Organizational Meeting
Athol Town Hall
Athol, Massachusetts

January 30, 2017; 6:30 P.M.

Participants present: Joseph Larson/Chair/Fisheries and Wildlife Board; State Representative Susannah Whipps Lee; State Senator Anne Gobi; DFG Commissioner George Peterson; MassWildlife Director Jack Buckley; Stephanie Swanson/Senator Lesser's office); DCR Commissioner Leo Roy; DCR Director of Water Supply Protection Jonathan Yeo; Ret. General William J. Meehan II/North Worcester County Quabbin Anglers; Dan Hammock/Quabbin Fisherman Association; Nancy Talbot/Selectperson and Town Clerk, Ware; Bill Barnett/Selectperson, Belchertown; David Small/Athol Bird and Nature Club; Mike Jones/State Herpetologist; Al Richmond/Dept. of Biology, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Chair Larson called the meeting to order at 6:35. He opened the meeting by offering his thanks to the town of Athol for the meeting location. He then asked the participants to identify themselves, which they did one at a time, briefly providing details of their backgrounds that pertained to why they were part of the working group.

The Chair also welcomed the citizens and members of the public, thanking them for coming. To begin the meeting, he offered a brief background synopsis of the major events leading up to this first meeting of the Working Group. He stated that the panel will make recommendations at the end of the process: whether the Rattlesnake Conservation Project goes forward as previously planned, changes are made to it, or it does not go forward. He stated his belief that MassWildlife and the Fisheries and Wildlife Board could have done a better job of informing the residents of Quabbin towns, and that the Working Group would change the protocol to include input and information from the area towns. Chair Larson said the objective of the current meeting is to determine the best process to seek input from people in the Quabbin towns over the four planned meetings. The ongoing objective is to gather the questions that were not answered and the scientific information that was not considered, because the Fisheries and Wildlife Board needs to know what the questions are and to consider all the facts. Commissioner Peterson added that the Department and MassWildlife want as much information as we can get, from as many people as possible.

Chair Larson reviewed the documents that were presented to the Participants for the meeting, stating that they had also received the protocol document approved by the Fisheries and Wildlife Board as an email attachment, and that he had drafted the one-page review survey form as a starting point for discussion. He then outlined the planned overall schedule for the review for the public present, stating that Athol is the first of four planned meetings, over the coming months, to be held in other Quabbin area towns (dates and locations to be determined), with a Final Report and Recommendations to be delivered to the Fisheries and Wildlife Board. He reviewed the planned process for public involvement and the role of the Participants in the Working Group. He stated that the review survey form can be returned to the Participant that distributed it or to MassWildlife at the Westborough address, or can be filled out on the MassWildlife website. In answer to a question from Rep. Whipps Lee as to how long it would take to put up the website, and that it should provide the background of the review, including back to the first oversight meeting 8 months previously. Director Buckley reported that his staff is already working on the structure of the web page, which will have some background, but needs to balance the amount of information provided with getting it up as quickly as possible.

In response to a question from Selectperson Talbot about whether people can be assured that no snakes will be put out while the questions and comments are being gathered and considered, Commissioner Peterson stated that the original plan is completely on hold, pending the outcome of the review, and that the Working Group is charged to gather all the questions and information that will be involved in any decision. When asked for the specifics of the website timeline, Director Buckley stated that it can be quickly, a couple of days, but that the specific questions that will be asked need to be designed first.

Sen. Gobi stated that a number of questions had come up at the time of the oversight committee meeting that need to be addressed, such as what has been done over the past 40 years to conserve the rattlesnakes in other places where populations exist. She also stated that she wants to make sure the Working Group is looking at the long term for the rattlesnakes, and other endangered species, and can examine what else could be or has been done where the snakes already are, and she asked for that information to be provided to the Working Group at the next meeting. Commissioner Peterson affirmed that the working Group is looking at the whole spectrum of options, in the five locations where they already are, not just at the issue of Mount Zion.

Retired General Meehan stated that he was glad to hear that the discussion will also look at what is being or could be done at other sites and other alternatives to the Mount Zion site. He stated that anglers have been developing and have a list of questions to submit to the Working Group, and he distributed copies of the list to the Participants.

Rep. Whipps Lee stated that she would like weekly reports of the questions received in the course of the review, and that the Working Group needs to establish modes of communication between the Participants. Commissioner Peterson stated that he is expecting to bring collations of the questions to the meetings, and that the Participants will get the list of questions and issues, and then to go through them one at a time. He stated that the website will need to have a time frame and an end point, so that there is time to collate the questions and the information gathered. Sen. Gobi stated that the website needs to provide some direction to the public, so that people understand what the process will be after they submit their questions or information. Director Buckley affirmed that what goes up on the website has to be clear and carefully framed, to get the responses correctly and accurately.

In response to a general discussion about aspects of the Rattlesnake Conservation Project as originally developed, Retired General Meehan stated he agreed that it is not a popularity contest, and that it will be important to raise the questions that need to be addressed so that people feel the Working Group has gotten their input and made a balanced decision. Responding to comments about the large amount of money dedicated to the project, Chair Larson provided some background on the issue of the fungus on snakes, explaining that it had been feared in the scientific community that it would be similar to the fungus on bats, but that, thanks to the study that has already been done as a result of the large federal grant, researchers have found that the fungus isn't as bad as had been thought. He stated that he can see now that the expression of the first question in the draft he presented to the Working Group needs to be expanded. Mr. Small agreed, stating that the Working Group needs to craft the questions to avoid just getting comments or opinions that only state whether people like snakes or not. He stated that comments that neither ask a question nor provide information will not be helpful, and that the questions asked on the review survey form need to gather as much useful information as possible. Director Buckley stated that the Working Group needs to solicit two types of things: questions, which are important and can be answered, including the economic ones; and comments, which are more difficult to work with and not challengeable on any basis.

Selectperson Talbot reiterated that the Working Group also needs more detail about why the project is needed and how long the project has been developing.

Mr. Hammock stated that the people in the region were not considered, and that there was a lot of taxpayers' money involved, so it was also a financially important question. He asked how do you accurately determine where people come from who enjoy the Quabbin, what effect the project would have on tourism in the area, and which mom-and-pop businesses might be affecting if tourism drops off. Wondering about the possible economic effects, he stated that approaching the chambers of commerce might be one option. In the ensuing discussion of visitors and tourism impacts, it was determined that good data is available on numbers of hunters and anglers that use the Quabbin, but that the numbers of hikers and bird-watchers were less easily known. Mr. Small reported that one can use social media to reach out to large numbers of people who hike, bird, etc., very quickly, and that there are at least five groups on Facebook that he knows of that can be tapped. Sen. Gobi stated that she was concerned about focusing on the Quabbin and losing the emphasis on the whole state. Director Buckley noted that it is going to be tricky, not to focus too sharply on the area or look only at the larger state in the brief time allotted for the review. Commissioner Roy stated that the DCR already has a complex mission, and oversees lands for citizens, conservation, and recreation. He noted that many of the existing hibernacula are on DCR lands where his agency is already balancing the needs of species and of recreation.

In a discussion of the threats to rattlesnakes and the possible role of law enforcement, Chair Larson reported that he had attended a meeting on Timber Rattlesnake conservation, and he stated that there are major law-enforcement issues, with poaching and destruction of snakes all along the Appalachians. Entire populations are being impacted by these activities, in areas that are difficult to patrol even when you have enough officers, which Massachusetts does not.

Mr. Hammock responded that his two concerns, whether the Working Group will have enough time and will it include input from the people, have largely been met. He stated that a professional, economic study needs to be done on the tourism aspects of the project.

Rep. Whipps Lee stated that the Working Group needs more data from Dr. French, on a statewide basis. She noted that the draft questions need to be scrapped as too specific to the Quabbin. It was decided that the Working Group needs to get Participants' comments back within 7 days, and can then rewrite as needed. It was decided that the Working Group would develop the questions for the review survey form via an email list among the Participants.

Mr. Hammock noted that the federal grant for the project will run out in 2018, but Chair Larson explained that the original funding was to study across multiple states the impact of the fungus on snakes and has been completed. What is ongoing now is very low-cost; the people at the Zoo are not charging MassWildlife for raising the snakes. The multi-state grant has run its course and all the states are proceeding with their plans.

When Retired General Meehan mentioned the success of the Piping Plover plan, as a possible model, Chair Larson explained that habitat management is what the birds responded to. In the snakes' case, maturing forest is shading out basking areas, for example, and people tend to get upset whenever mature trees are cut anywhere.

Commissioner Peterson reported that the Piping plovers were a success story, but that there was a lot of angst among beach communities in the development of the plan and the permit. The process was forced to adapt to the parameters of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Relative to the question of how to

proceed, he suggested the Working Group choose a date for the next meeting and a set of questions for the scientists to answer. Rep. Whipps Lee confirmed that the Working Group will need general information on where the other populations are and their census and status as part of a scientific overview. Dr. Jones reported that existing sites need to be carefully protected and outlined some of the conservation challenges around the snakes. He outlined the existing framework of the conservation meetings he's been conducting across the state and the need-to-know basis of participation in each. Rep. Whipps Lee and Chair Larson affirmed that the Working group will need the numbers of snakes and the numbers of sites only; Participants and the public don't need to know exactly where they are.

Chair Larson stated that the Working Group will also want a running tabulation of the questions at each of the coming meetings, and that MassWildlife can provide a weekly email with numbers of responses and types or classes of questions and information submitted.

It was decided that a poll would be set up to allow the Participants to decide the exact date of the next meeting, with February 28 and March 6 as the main possibilities. It was decided that a 6:30 P.M. meeting time would be acceptable again.

As the meeting closed, Director Buckley stated that the Participants should respond to a group email staff will send with 1) questions for the review survey form and the website and 2) questions the Participants want addressed at the next meeting.